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The Impact of Clyde Meredith on Taylor University

Joshua D. Meredith

Taylor University

Introduction

Rev. Dr. Clyde Meredith served as the twenty-first president of Taylor University. He left a legacy overshadowed by his relational fractures with historically iconic giants of the school. However, Meredith achieved many important successes during his time as president. The university initiated and completed a capital campaign to fund a new library (“Centennial advertisement,” 1945), started a football program (Ringenberg, 1996), boosted enrollment numbers (“Taylor university enrollment,” 1945), and achieved full academic accreditation (Ringenberg, 1996; “Newsletter to alumni,” 1951). Meredith’s presidency served as a catalyst and played a critical role in the formation of Taylor University as it is known today.

Background

Meredith brought with him an extensive educational and experiential background into his role as Taylor’s president. He earned an A.B. from Houghton College, a B.D. from Winona Lake School of Theology and Western Theological Seminary, and a Th.M. from Butler University College of Religion. Meredith served as Professor of Theology and Dean of the Divinity School at Marion College from 1939 until 1943, before accepting the offer to become the next President of Taylor University. During his time as president, Meredith finished his Th.D. from the Illiff School of Theology at Denver University (“Obituaries: Clyde Meredith,” 1980). Meredith was the first president of Taylor University to earn a doctorate degree (Ringenberg, 1996).

Taylor announced the selection of Meredith as the next president of the school in a newsletter to alumni (“New president chosen for Taylor,” 1945). In the same year, Dr. Milo Rediger assumed his role as the school’s dean. Rediger graduated from Taylor in 1939, and accepted a job as a professor at Taylor in 1943 (Ringenberg, 1996). Rediger would later become

an important figure in a bout of controversy surrounding Meredith's presidency. Taylor University held an inauguration for Meredith on November 6, 1946 at 2 p.m. in Maytag Gymnasium during the second year of his presidency ("President Meredith Inaugurated," 1946).

Success as President

President Meredith served during a pivotal time not only in the history of Taylor University, but also in the history of the United States. A year prior to Meredith's arrival on campus, the U.S. Congress passed the GI Bill (Olson, 1973) – one of the most important bills in the history of higher education – which led to the influx of veteran students on Taylor's campus. Taylor had an enrollment of 193 students in 1945 ("Taylor university enrollment," 1945). By 1947, enrollment reached 522 students (Ringenberg, 1996). To meet the needs of a growing student population, Taylor continued its efforts towards accreditation.

A 1939 evaluation report from the North Central Association (NCA) exposed many needed improvements in order for the university to be granted full accreditation. After receiving the NCA's feedback, business manager Marion E. Whitmer initiated efforts to shore up several key areas of operation including but not limited to supporting faculty efforts through a more expansive library, strengthening the school's financial position, and improving and maturing student personnel services. President Meredith and Dr. Rediger presented and defended the efforts of Whitmer and others at a 1947 accreditation hearing in Chicago. The NCA accepted Taylor University's application for membership and granted the school full accreditation (Ringenberg, 1996).

When Taylor welcomed Meredith as its new president in 1945, the school also enrolled its one hundredth graduating class. Along with its centennial cohort, the university also initiated a new capital campaign for its "Centennial Fund." The fundraising efforts sought to raise

\$500,000 for the building of a new library, Ayers Memorial Hall (“100th class will enroll September 11, 1945,” 1945). The University later claimed, “a new library is imperative and is our centennial goal” (“Centennial advertisement,” 1945, p. 1). Taylor held a dedication service for the new building on October 14, 1950 (“Ayers dedication service to be held October 14,” 1950).

An additional accomplishment of Meredith’s was the addition of a football program. Taylor ushered in its inaugural football season during the fall of 1948. Coach Don J. Odle proposed the idea in 1947, and President Meredith largely supported the idea. However, many faculty members expressed opposition to the program, which later contributed to the controversy surrounding Meredith’s presidency (Ringenberg, 1996).

Controversy

President Meredith achieved many significant milestones for Taylor University. However, Meredith’s buoyant administration began to sink during the latter portion of his tenure. Meredith endured disagreement, discourse, disgruntled staff, and rebellious faculty. Early on in his Taylor career, Meredith conveyed his desire for transparency: “In all fairness to the graduates of Taylor they deserve to know the administration, and deserve also, to be brought up to date in the affairs of the school” (“Statement from president C.W. Meredith,” 1946, p. 1). The president got his wish. In the end, Meredith pushed Taylor University to grow and mature as an institution, but not without significant difficulty.

Dr. Rediger and others disagreed with President Meredith on the issue of academic freedom (Ringenberg, 1996; Alspaugh, Pogue, Prose, & Dare, 1950). In particular, the quarrel centered on the role of returning GIs on campus and in university affairs (W. Rediger, personal communication, October 24, 2018). The argument followed the passage of the GI Bill in 1945,

which paid for the tuition of soldiers returning from the Second World War (Olson, 1973).

Meredith believed the returning veteran soldiers were no different from other students and should remain as such. Rediger believed the experience and leadership qualities of the veterans could play an important role in the future direction of the university. Rediger wanted GIs to serve on leadership committees and provide insight for university decisions; Meredith, however, did not (W. Rediger, personal communication, October 24, 2018). As a result, Rediger resigned from the deanship in 1948, but retained his position as a professor until 1950 (Ringenberg, 1996).

In addition to Rediger, many other faculty members strongly disagreed and opposed the actions of the president. Dr. Burt Ayers believed Meredith was “selling the school down the river” in his support of the new football program (Meredith, March 1950). Ted Engstrom of Christian Digest Publishing Company, and a generous donor to the university, supported Meredith in his efforts (Engstrom, 1950). Nevertheless, many personnel including Grace Olson and Hazel Butz-Caruth supported Rediger and Ayers. Meredith’s attempts to gain institutional control and the loyalty of the faculty soon faded.

By the spring of 1950, dissension reached a boiling point. Meredith’s attempt to reconcile differences and gain the cooperation of Rediger, Olson, and Butz-Caruth proved unsuccessful. In June, after the conclusion of the spring semester, Meredith charged Rediger, Olson, and Butz-Caruth with insubordination and asked them to resign (Alspaugh et al., 1950). Meredith wrote to a colleague, Francis H. Davis, regarding the matter: “The inevitable disruption that will come from their leaving likewise carries its uninviting difficulties. Nevertheless, I cannot see how I could do otherwise” (Meredith, July 1950).

Rumors circulated among Taylor students, faculty, alumni, and local community, which administration attempted to quell. Several members of the Alumni Association expressed concerns over the growing tensions, and suggested an inquiry into the matter (Brose, 1950).

A.L. Forrest, the university dean, addressed the issue by sending a letter to all staff members:

It has come to my attention that a number of erroneous reports concerning administrative policy have been circulating about the campus since the end of the spring semester.

Because I have enjoyed so much the confidence and frankness of the staff in talking with me concerning matters of institutional policy, I am extremely sorry concerning these rumors. (Forrest, 1950, p. 1)

Forrest specifically countered four rumors: first, the president and dean received raises of \$1000 and \$500, respectively; second, 14 staff members planned to leave Taylor at the end of the academic year; third, some members of the faculty were asked to resign without previous correspondence or attempts to cooperate; fourth, other faculty members were asked to resign or put under unusual pressure to cooperate. Forrest described the rumors as “false in the extreme” (1950).

The alumni directors called for an investigation of the growing tensions between Meredith’s administration and the students, local community, and alumni (Alspaugh et al., 1950). The university displayed confidence in dealing with the situation. Faculty penned a letter to all alumni and students asserting, “Taylor has a board made up of Christian men, elected for the purpose of weighing such matters, examining evidence, and making decisions...We believe that they are acting for the best interests of Taylor” (Faculty, 1950). However, rumors swirled, and letters circulated during the summer months. A growing number of alumni became concerned about the university’s high turnover rate:

A review of the faculty situation shows that only four of those on the staff when Dr. Meredith came into power are now here. Ten faculty members, the librarian, the registrar, a business manager, the farm superintendent, besides others of the staff, have resigned or been dismissed during the past year. (Alspaugh et al., 1950).

When classes convened for the fall semester, four students had become so upset over the departures of several faculty such as Dr. Rediger, Miss Olson, and Miss Butz-Caruth, they sent a letter to their fellow students. In the letter, the four distraught students urged their peers to write letters to the alumni association in support of Rediger, Olson, and Butz-Caruth (Alspaugh et al., 1950). A growing concern existed among the student population regarding Taylor's business manager. He insisted on carrying a gun while on campus, which intimidated and frightened many students (Alspaugh et al., 1950).

Forrest urged for cooperation and unity. He asked alumni to be patient and stated that "mature Christians should not be swayed by every passing rumor" (1950, p. 1). Forrest insisted the administration was doing its best. He also suggested alumni should "ignore the petty" and "ask God to help us do the truly important jobs of our day" (1950, p. 1).

Coach Don J. Odle and other alumni sent a letter to their fellow Taylor alumni offering similar reassurances. "We assure you that there are two sides to the story and despite all rumors about our college, Taylor University still is a great institution" (Odle, 1950). Odle encouraged alumni to visit campus, talk with students and faculty, and have "faith in our school" (Odle, 1950).

An editorial in the February 20, 1951 Echo noted an unsuccessful attempt of a group of students to gain answers to its questions at a recent Taylor University board of trustees meeting. The author described one particular board member who "complained" and "showed his

disapproval” of the students’ inquiries by “his refusal to discuss the matter in the board meeting” (“A plea for unity,” 1951). The article, titled “A Plea for Unity,” offered a final attempt by students to achieve what the title suggested – unity.

Fallout

The Taylor University board voted 7 to 6 in a meeting on June 4, 1951 in favor of asking President Meredith for his resignation. The board terminated Meredith’s services on June 30 and extended his salary for six months to aid in his transition out of office (Dunn, 1951). Taylor University Director of Public Relations, Willis J. Dunn, expressed his disagreement and frustration in one final newsletter to alumni:

“This action was taken in response to persistent pressure and expressions of dissatisfaction by several small alumni groups. The great majority of constituents refrained from participating but a small minority continued to cause confusion and unrest.... The resignation of Dr. Meredith is regretted by many who have seen Taylor University reach its greatest development and influence under his leadership. Dr. Meredith’s record for the past six years is an enviable one for any administrator of a small Christian college.” (Dunn, 1951, p. 1)

Dunn resigned his position on June 30, 1951 in support of Meredith. Additionally, three board members and a large number of staff and faculty also submitted resignations (Dunn, 1951). Paul P. Williams served as director of physical education, head football coach, and head baseball coach. Williams submitted his resignation from leadership but offered to fulfill the remaining requirements of his contract as a staff member (Williams, 1951).

The university sent a letter asking all remaining faculty to sign a statement of loyalty and “intent to return” for the following school year (Trevithick, 1951). Some individuals, such as

Gladys Trevithick, registrar, hesitated to offer such a commitment until the university filled several voids in leadership and announced the name of its next president (1951). Others, like Hildreth Marie Cross, balked at the idea of not fulfilling the remainder of their contracts (Cross, n.d.).

The university faced many challenges following the departure of Meredith. First, Taylor needed to fill dozens of administrative and faculty position vacancies. It also faced difficulty in finding new sources of funding, as President Meredith had many generous supporters. The departure of three board members also contributed to newfound financial uncertainties (Dunn, 1951).

Conclusion

Meredith left legacy consisting of success as well as controversy, but he served as an integral part in Taylor's growth and maturation as an institution. Meredith's departure dealt a significant blow to institutional momentum gained during his tenure. According to Willis J. Dunn, the "modern, aggressive administrative policies were used by the president to help the University realize its fullest possibilities in Christian service and contribution" (1951, p. 1). Meredith's administration challenged the likes of Olson, Rediger, and Butz-Caruth to consider their aims, and think deeply about the mission and purpose of Taylor University. Taylor University became a better institution because of President Meredith.

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